



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The agonies of liberalism

Citation for published version:

Chabal, E 2016, 'The agonies of liberalism', *Contemporary European History*.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000321>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0960777316000321](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000321)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Contemporary European History

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The Agonies of Liberalism

Emile Chabal

Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 468 pp. (hb), US\$35, ISBN 978-0-691-15689-7

Hagen Schulz-Forberg & Niklas Olsen (eds.), *Re-Inventing Western Civilisation: Transnational Reconstructions of Liberalism in Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 244 pp. (hb), £47.99, ISBN 978-1-4438-6049-9

Raf Geenens & Helena Rosenblatt (eds.), *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 318 pp. (hb), £64.99, ISBN 978-1-1070-1743-6

Steven E. Aschheim, *At the Edges of Liberalism: Junctions of European, German and Jewish History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 273 pp. (pb), £20.99, ISBN 978-1-1370-0228-0

Peter Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 281 pp. (hb), £65.00, ISBN 978-0-1987-2350-9

It is striking the extent to which many liberals have seen themselves as figures on the margins of politics. This is partly an ideological issue. Of all the great ‘isms’ of the modern age, liberalism has had neither the historical certainty of the two great totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, nor the reassuring hierarchical logic of conservatism. Most liberals have agonised about how much humans can achieve and have repeatedly stressed the fallibility of

rational or democratic solutions, at least in comparison with more revolutionary ideologies like communism. But liberals' sense of living on the margins is also a consequence of the context in which liberalism was born. In Europe, the spectre of the French Revolution – and, later, the Bolshevik Revolution – gave liberalism a specific flavour. Liberals were often keen on reform, but they always feared social upheaval. Time and again, liberals found themselves in power only to lose control of the pace of social change. In the worst cases – 1815, 1848 or 1917 spring to mind – this put the liberal cause back by generations. For much of modern European history, to be a liberal was to be in a perpetual state of siege.

Of course, one can easily raise questions about this narrative. Those on the left have long accused liberals of wielding far more power than they will admit. Most recently, the advent of an all-conquering global neoliberalism has renewed this rhetoric. Today's self-confessed liberals might plead marginality, but there are many Europeans who would disagree, as the Greek debt crisis has amply demonstrated.¹ Likewise, the benign narrative of liberalism as a beacon of good sense and moderation in a sea of hostile ideologies has repeatedly run up against the rocky shores of imperialism. The zeal with which many liberals endorsed colonising projects in India or Algeria – and, some would argue, in Iraq or Afghanistan in the twenty-first century – sits uncomfortably with the idea that liberalism has always represented an ideology of emancipation and positive social change.² While many of today's liberals instinctively recoil at the idea that they are somehow the proponents of a 'predatory neoliberalism' or apologists for 'liberal imperialism', the criticisms are hard to shake off – and perfectly legitimate. Like it or not, liberalism is a powerful presence in today's political landscape.

Indeed, it would not be much of a stretch to argue that liberalism is the only coherent global ideology of modern European history to have survived relatively unscathed into the twenty-first century. There are echoes of communism and socialism in European far-left

movements (Podemos, Syriza, Die Linke. . .), and there are memories of counter-revolutionary, neo-fascist or clerical conservatism in European far-right movements (the Front National, Golden Dawn, Jobbik. . .) But one does not have to be in thrall to the post-communist liberal democratic triumphalism of the 1990s to see that liberalism has remained a vital reference point for political parties, politicians and political culture across Europe, North America and beyond.³ In some countries, liberals are reticent to describe themselves as such, but this does not necessarily mean that liberalism is absent.⁴ It would be much more accurate to say that liberalism has expanded and adapted itself to very different contexts, even as other ideologies have atrophied or died.

Yet the multiple manifestations of liberalism in contemporary politics raise difficult questions for scholars of liberalism, the most significant of which is how to remain analytical without becoming an apologist. This problem is apparent here, as the books under consideration take a broadly sympathetic view of liberalism. This does not mean that all the authors or editors are liberals, although some of them quite clearly are, simply that they universally approach their subject matter within a liberal framework and accept the self-definition of liberals as marginal, but often brilliant, individuals seeking compromise in a dangerous world. In some cases, most obviously for the German-Jewish intellectuals that are the subject of Aschheim's essays, it is a deeply flawed compromise, but nevertheless one that is understandable and occasionally laudable. Liberalism, as it is presented here, is an ideology worth protecting.

Obviously, this particular slant means that anyone looking for a surgical dissection of liberal ideology or an indictment of liberal imperial arrogance is unlikely to be satisfied with any of these books.⁵ And they certainly have a tendency to make liberalism and liberals appear rather less controversial than they were at key moments in European history. Still, these five books do have the benefit of focusing our attention on a number of conceptual

issues. Of these, three in particular stand out: first, whether it is possible to define liberalism in any kind of rigorous way; second, whether there are limits to liberalism and, if so, where these are and, finally, whether there is any fundamental difference between ‘liberalism’ and ‘neoliberalism’. The authors in question do not give consistent answers to these questions, but the questions themselves are all vital to the study of liberalism. It therefore seems appropriate to deal with each one in turn – both as a way of assessing the contribution of each book to the existing literature and as a way of exploring the geographical and conceptual limitations of the field.

The Many Meanings of Liberalism

The question of how to define liberalism is one that has preoccupied generations of scholars. Most concur that liberalism involves some mix of individual liberty, rational projects for political reform, a belief in emancipation and a certain idea of human civilisation, but even these very general tenets are open for debate since liberal movements have generally rejected ‘platforms’, ‘manifestos’ and ‘genealogies’.⁶ In recent decades such definitional problems have been exacerbated by stark regional differences. In many European countries ‘liberalism’ is strongly associated with free-market capitalism, liberal democracy and free enterprise; this means that it is routinely used as a term of abuse by members of left-wing parties and movements to describe those on the right. In the United States, on the other hand, ‘liberalism’ is associated with big government, progressive taxation, the welfare state and permissive social legislation; in an exact reversal of the European case it is those on the right who decry the dangerous liberalism of the left. Clearly, liberalism has common origins in an eighteenth-century project to elevate rationality, freedom and human responsibility, but these pronounced (and growing) differences in meaning in the twenty-first century have made it

very difficult to write about liberalism without taking into account the meaning of the term on both sides of the Atlantic.

Surprisingly, the only one of these five books to take this challenge seriously is Edmund Fawcett's engaging *aperçu* of the history of liberalism. Fawcett is a political journalist rather than a career academic, and this shows in his ability to cut through the minutiae of historiographical debate and head straight for the 'story' – which, in this case, is the 'story' of liberals as diverse as François Guizot, Samuel Smiles, Abraham Lincoln, David Lloyd George, John Maynard Keynes, Friedrich Hayek, Pierre Mendès France, Willy Brandt and Margaret Thatcher (to name but a few). Rather than get bogged down in a terminological minefield, Fawcett's approach to the question 'what is liberalism?' consists of multiplying biographical sketches and anecdotes in the hope that eventually some kind of de facto definition emerges from the plethora of histories on show. For the most part, it makes for a persuasive – if sometimes rather disorientating – read. One cannot help but be impressed by Fawcett's ecumenism. One could no doubt accuse him of methodological elitism but, within the elite, he leaves no stone unturned: his list includes academic intellectuals, American presidents, career politicians, economists and policy administrators. He is also refreshingly attuned to the diversity of liberal thinking in Western Europe and North America. He does not make the easy mistake of assuming that liberalism takes the same form everywhere and his wide reading on the subject means that he can speak knowledgeably about liberals in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States without resorting to glib generalisations.

So keen is Fawcett to dispense with any kind of bold conceptual claim that he urges impatient readers on the very first page of the book to 'skip this explanatory introduction and go straight to the story'. But this genuine and useful desire to focus on individual liberal trajectories inevitably raises problems for both lay and expert readers who might be expecting

more from a book that purports to offer the ‘history of an idea’. At the most detailed level, the absence of any real schematic ‘definition’ of liberalism often leaves the reader wading through all kinds of information that has little to do with the political philosophy of the actors involved. It is interesting to know that George Eliot fell in love with Herbert Spencer or that Hayek contracted malaria at the end of the First World War, but these anecdotes do not get us much closer to understanding liberalism as an idea. Similarly, Fawcett’s commendable inclusivity makes for all sorts of strange bedfellows. For the post-war period alone, the decision to include figures like Jean-Paul Sartre or François Mitterrand in a book on liberalism seems to be stretching our definition to breaking point. It is true that Fawcett’s aim in bringing in these people is to explore the liberal aspects of their thought and practice, or simply to look at major actors who were in dialogue with liberalism throughout their careers. But it has the tendency to allow liberalism to swallow other ideologies and traditions. The claim, for instance, that republicanism was essentially another word for liberalism in late nineteenth-century France is a contentious one and downplays the importance of revolutionary, Jacobin and Napoleonic political traditions.⁷ Moving forward chronologically, the short section (245–67) that deals with liberal economists in the 1930s – Keynes, Irving Fisher and Hayek – is full of excellent details about these men and their work but fails to identify this period as a key schism in liberal visions of politics, with Keynes advocating a stronger state and Hayek endorsing a minimalist view.

Early in the book Fawcett rejects the notion that there are ‘many liberalisms’.⁸ This allows him to draw on the ideas and biographies of a huge range of figures. But, for someone with such a bold methodological stance, he remains in thrall to the diversity of liberalism over time. The result is a book lacking in a theoretical core that gives meaning to the plethora of characters. One is left feeling that it might have been easier to begin with a specific case study of liberalism rather than Fawcett’s all-inclusive approach – and there are a number of

essays in other volumes that support this view. Perhaps the two best examples of conceptual frameworks derived from specific cases are the essays by Larry Siedentop and Lucien Jaume in Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt's edited volume on French liberalism.⁹ Spurred on by the widely held view that France has always had a 'defective' or 'disabled' liberal tradition, both Siedentop and Jaume offer useful, if schematic, models that we can use to understand how liberalism has developed.

It was in the late 1970s that Siedentop first articulated his view that French liberal thought has always been more 'historical', more sensitive to 'change' and more concerned with 'social structure' than its Anglophone cousin, but the republication of his seminal essay in this volume is a welcome reminder of the prescience of his analysis.¹⁰ Siedentop's claim has certainly been borne out by the very different shape of France's liberal revival in the 1970s compared with the neoliberal wave that swept North America and the United Kingdom at the same time.¹¹ In some ways Jaume builds on Siedentop's ideas, but he gives a distinct picture based on his knowledge of early nineteenth-century liberalism. For him there were three major strands to French liberalism – an 'elitist form' (favoured by thinkers like Guizot), a 'constitutionalist and individualist form' (favoured by thinkers like Benjamin Constant) and a liberal Catholic form (favoured by thinkers like Charles de Montalembert). Again, this offers a useful insight into the contours of French liberalism both in the nineteenth century and up to the present day. Most importantly, Siedentop's dual structure and Jaume's tripartite one show how a conceptual framework can help anchor our understanding of liberalism's history.

Yet even where a biographical or individual perspective seems appropriate, it does not have to lead to the dispersion and overlapping narratives of Fawcett's book. Another approach is to look at the networks of sociability and friendship amongst liberals, which is exactly what some of the contributors to Hagen Schulz-Forberg and Niklas Olsen's volume

try to do. For instance, Dieter Plehwe and Katja Walther adopt an explicitly social scientific network approach – using quantitative research and meticulous statistical mapping – to reveal the close-knit relationships amongst members of the Mont Pèlerin Society.¹² The picture that emerges is one of a small group of devoted transnational academics who believed that their cohesiveness was crucial to their success. It was not simply the famous figures of Hayek and Milton Friedman who gave the group its strength; it was also the commitment of an ‘inner circle’ of members, many of whom are not well-known. Similarly, Ben Jackson adopts a parallel, though less quantitative approach, in his penetrating chapter on the ‘think-tank archipelago’ that lay behind the conversion of the UK Conservative Party to neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, too, ‘back channels and informal networks’ laid the foundation for the neoliberal onslaught. In Jackson’s view, it was friendship and peer pressure that ensured the spread of neoliberal ideas across the British elite.¹³

The importance of networks to the persistence of liberalism raises an important question: what if liberalism is defined not so much by what it is but by the company it keeps? This would apply to both the ideologies that liberals have combined with liberalism (‘Christian’ liberalism, liberal ‘democracy’, ‘social’ liberalism. . .) and the kinds of places liberals have tended to congregate (universities, businesses, the upper echelons of state administrations. . .) In this reading liberalism is less an ideology than a sensibility – and one that is best cultivated in the boardroom or common room. This would certainly fit the traditional view that liberals prefer fraternising with each other rather than with the masses. And it would also explain why, when liberalism fails to persuade electors at the ballot box, it ends up being brought in through policy initiatives and technocratic injunctions.¹⁴ After all, if there is one thing that characterises liberalism – and this much is clear from Fawcett’s overview – it is a self-conscious intellectualism. Liberals’ commitment to the rational means

that they often have a stern, if not dismissive, attitude towards those less capable than themselves.

The Limits of the Liberal Sensibility

But what happens when the best laid liberal plans fall apart? What happens when the frontiers of liberalism are breached? There are countless examples of such moments in European and world history. French liberals watched in horror as their country descended into revolution and dictatorship in 1848, British liberals saw their delicate hold on politics swept away by the rise of the Labour Party in the middle decades of the twentieth century and liberals across Europe were appalled by the collapse of the rule of law and democracy in the interwar period. Apart from their intrinsic interest as points of abrupt ideological change, these moments also shed light on the meaning of liberalism, especially since liberals have often espoused ‘moderation’ or ‘consensus’ in the face of illiberal forces.¹⁵ We can learn a great deal, not simply from the inner coherence of liberalism, but also from its outer edges.

There can be few better case studies of liberal collapse than the subject of Steven E. Aschheim’s learned and powerful essays on the German-Jewish intellectual of the early twentieth century. Aschheim has spent much of his distinguished career examining the intellectual aspects of what is surely one of the greatest historiographical paradoxes of the modern age: how a highly ‘civilised’ and ‘learned’ Germany was seduced by Nazism and became the site of some of the twentieth century’s most gut-wrenching atrocities. By focusing on the German-Jewish experience, he pushes this paradox to its extreme. There is something excruciating about the lives of figures like Gershom Scholem, Victor Klemperer and Hannah Arendt. Like so many other European intellectuals of this period, they combined extraordinary multi-lingual and transnational learning with an acute sense for the most pressing issues of their day and a more or less open arrogance towards ‘lesser’ peoples or

cultures. Except that they lived to witness the almost complete extermination of their community at the hands of the Germanic civilisation that they had elevated above all others. In the face of the Holocaust, even the cultivated liberalism of German-Jewish intellectuals could not survive.

In many ways, the Aschheim essays under review here (all of which were previously published between 2001 and 2011) are not really about liberalism at all. Instead, they cover a vast canvas, ranging from early Zionism and conceptions of evil to German–Jewish theatre and the nature of the intellectual. Nevertheless, they give us important insights into the frayed edges of liberalism where its contradictions become most apparent. To take but one example, in his chapter on orientalism Aschheim describes how early twentieth-century bourgeois Jews sought to emancipate themselves from European anti-Semitism, sometimes by turning to Zionism, but also by simultaneously adopting the imperial prejudices of their non-Jewish liberal counterparts. They looked down on their ‘Eastern’ or ‘Asian’ roots and repeatedly dismissed the Arab culture of the Middle East.¹⁶ Still today many Zionist ideologues in Israel cling to the same liberal orientalist contradictions as their predecessors. This is a salutary reminder that ideas of liberal emancipation – just like ideas of liberal democracy – are unevenly applied across the world.

Aschheim’s essays draw our attention to another key tension within liberalism: the yawning gap between liberal theory and liberal practice. Many of the Central European Jewish bourgeoisie were deeply attached to the rational, enquiring and tolerant liberalism of the nineteenth century. However, by the 1930s they were – as Eric Hobsbawm memorably described it in his memoirs – living on borrowed time.¹⁷ There was no place for genteel liberalism in an age of brittle political polarisation, and Aschheim notes how young Jewish intellectuals who came of age after the First World War were seduced away from liberalism towards Marxism or Zionism. With the rise of Nazism, the Great Depression and the collapse

of the Popular Fronts in Spain and France, the last hopes for a liberal solution to the interwar crisis were extinguished; liberalism seemed to have vanished for good. The conclusion was clear: when faced with a pressing reality, the grand ideas of liberalism were far weaker than its practical manifestations.¹⁸

Although Britain was largely spared the ideological cataclysm that hit continental Europe in the interwar period, there were numerous echoes of liberalism's decline. While the period before the First World War saw the triumph of New Liberalism after 1906, the interwar years became increasingly bleak for the party, culminating in the complete electoral collapse of 1924, when the Liberals gained only forty seats. With the exception of the National Government in the early 1930s, the Liberal Party would never again be part of government until the 2010 coalition between Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. Yet, despite this lengthy period in the wilderness, Peter Sloman's careful and well-documented examination of the Liberal Party's economic policies from the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s suggests that there was more to British liberalism than its electoral failure. On the contrary, the party became a forum for economic policy discussions, most of which revolved around the nature and extent of state intervention. Using an extensive array of primary sources, Sloman reconstructs the varieties of economic thinking that crossed the party, from the 1928 'Yellow Book' that advocated something like a British New Deal, to the more individualist temptations of the 1960s.

Understandably, in a close-grained study of this kind, Sloman does not offer many grand conceptual conclusions; that is not the purpose of his book. He nevertheless gives us an additional perspective on the boundaries of liberalism in the twentieth century. In particular, his work reinforces the disjunction between liberal ideas and practice. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, British liberals were exposed to a wide range of economic ideas and formed, at least in theory, a vibrant intellectual community. But they were singularly unable

to translate this into electoral success or even have any significant impact on the economic policy of the period. Outflanked by the Labour Party's commitment to state socialism – especially after 1945 – liberals struggled to construct an alternative platform. Even when liberalism came back into fashion in the 1970s, it was not the Liberals but the Conservatives who embraced it.

What explains this fragility of liberalism when faced with political power? Sloman, who focuses specifically on Britain, suggests that it was a classic combination of factionalism, ideological confusion and poor leadership. By contrast, Siedentop and Jean-Fabien Spitz's essays in the Geenens and Rosenblatt volume take a more philosophical approach. They argue that the problem with (French) liberals in the nineteenth century was their inadequate conception of the 'social'. In order to explain social change, French liberals therefore needed to draw on other political ideas, which ended up 'diluting' – or, at the very least, modifying – French liberalism and making it more vulnerable to ideologies that emphasised the social above all else (such as Communism or Gaullism).¹⁹ Finally, Aschheim's work suggests a deeper reason for liberalism's failures. For the German-Jewish intellectuals that are the subject of his essays, it is almost as if liberalism was an insufficiently emotional worldview. It offered a rational foundation for the bourgeois European intellectual, but it could not speak to the moral dilemmas of early twentieth-century Judaism like Zionism or Marxism. A scholar of liberalism like Aurelian Craiutu – whose essay on Raymond Aron's 'moderation' appears in Geenens and Rosenblatt's book – would no doubt argue that it is precisely this ability to temper emotions that marks liberalism out from other ideologies.²⁰ But Aschheim's fundamental point remains: one of the most powerful frontiers of liberalism is emotional. At times of crisis, the unwillingness of liberals to appeal to what Tocqueville and later François Furet called the 'passions' has often led to its complete collapse.²¹

The Genealogies of Neoliberalism

After a long period when it was out of fashion in both the Western world and the (then) Third World, liberalism made a spectacular comeback in the late 1970s. Indeed, so impressive was the revival that it gave birth to a new political ideology: neoliberalism. Based on a radically individualist reading of the liberal tradition, neoliberals defended the value of individual enterprise, the free market and the small state. Led by economists like Friedman and philosophers like Hayek and Ayn Rand, neoliberalism first penetrated the political systems of the United Kingdom and the United States in the late 1970s – under the patronage of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan respectively – before spreading all over the world.²² By the 1990s critics could legitimately cast neoliberalism as a truly global ideology, with its principles understood by policy makers and politicians from Santiago de Chile to Bombay. Such a reversal of fortunes in the liberal story could not have been predicted. By the late 1960s there were numerous indications that collectivist ideologies were under attack from young student radicals and disgruntled middle-managers, but this did not automatically mean that liberalism was the answer. Many more elements were needed in order to make neoliberalism into a dominant mode of thinking all over the world.

The question of how the European and American liberal traditions transformed themselves into what we now recognise as neoliberalism is surely one of the great questions of modern political history. Yet, despite some fascinating work on related subjects, relatively little has been written on the subject by scholars of liberalism.²³ Some of this is no doubt political. Many scholars of liberalism are clearly uncomfortable with aggressive neoliberal individualism and prefer to draw a clear distinction between, say, the ‘Chicago Boys’ of the 1970s and the more socially-orientated liberalism of a Tocqueville or a Hobhouse. To his credit, Fawcett does not do this. In his grand overview of liberalism, he treats Friedman, Hayek, Reagan and others alongside everyone else – as representatives of a global liberal

tradition. But his biographical approach offers only limited clues as to why neoliberalism was so successful. For more detailed insights, we need to look elsewhere.

The first major challenge is to explain the dissemination of neoliberal ideas. Several of the essays in the Schulz-Forberg and Olsen volume tackle this issue with varying degrees of success. Jackson's aforementioned chapter on the role of think tanks in the 1970s in the United Kingdom is probably the best of these as it combines empirical work with a strong theoretical claim about the way neoliberalism penetrated the British elite. Jackson's conclusions are supported by Olsen's intriguing biography of the Danish neoliberal economist Christian Gandil.²⁴ Gandil was the only member of the Mont Pèlerin Society to attend all of its twenty-four conferences between 1946 and 1987 and was a tireless advocate of neoliberal economic policies. Not surprisingly, Gandil's solutions were largely ignored in his home country; Denmark's strong post-war social democratic and Keynesian consensus was not conducive to the penetration of neoliberal ideas. Nevertheless, Gandil provides a link between older forms of neoliberalism from the 1940s and the resurgent neoliberalism of the 1980s. And, while Olsen is clear that Gandil himself did little to shape contemporary neoliberalism, the expression he uses to describe him ('a second-hand dealer in ideas') is suggestive. As our understanding of neoliberalism develops in future, a good deal of attention is likely to focus on precisely these kinds of people. After all, it is not a few star thinkers who have made a hitherto marginal strand of liberalism into its pre-eminent expression, it is the vast army of 'second-hand dealers in ideas'. They may not make for the most edifying subject matter, but any attempt to explain the dissemination of neoliberalism will require a multifaceted study of the middle managers, management consultants and university administrators who speak its ideas every day.

The second major problem in the study of neoliberalism is the ideological context in which it developed. Those who argue that neoliberalism represents a new 'spirit of

capitalism' or a new 'rationality' tend to draw a straight line from Adam Smith to Alan Greenspan.²⁵ But this ignores the profound ideological changes that occurred in the 1970s. Unfortunately, very little of the research on show here has anything to say about this. There is nothing on the collapse of a Marxist consensus amongst Europe's intelligentsia and the fragmentation of post-civil rights liberalism in the United States, both of which opened new intellectual spaces for more radical forms of liberalism.²⁶ There is also very little on the turn away from Keynesian economic policies in Europe and the rise of 'anti-government' Republicanism in the United States, except brief mentions in Fawcett's book.²⁷ The only contribution that enlarges our perspective on the intellectual contexts for the emergence of neoliberalism is Samuel Moyn's short chapter on the French debate on 'rights' in the 1980s.²⁸ By analysing the writings of Claude Lefort and his student Marcel Gauchet, Moyn explores whether the growth of rights discourse in France in this period can be described as 'liberal'. His answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, the desire to rehabilitate rights was an attempt to elaborate a post-Marxist framework for ethical politics – one that might be described as 'liberal'; on the other, both Lefort and Gauchet were sceptical of the individualist underpinnings of rights talk. This scepticism ran counter to the neoliberal revival that was taking place at the time.

Moyn's analysis points to the urgent need for further study of how neoliberalism interacted with the fractured and shifting ideological landscape of the 1970s.²⁹ The cliché – especially prevalent in France – that the '68 generation went from student radicals to investment bankers implies that it was a story of substitution (of neoliberalism for radical leftism) and disillusionment (with revolutionary politics).³⁰ But this obscures a myriad of other engagements and positions. It also forgets the non-Western variant of this story, something of which all the publications under review are guilty.³¹ Because, despite what anti-capitalist thinkers have argued, neoliberalism is not simply a Western construct; it has been

adopted all over the world. Inevitably, it has been a tool of neo-imperialism – one thinks of the IMF's structural adjustment policies of the 1990s or even the budgetary austerity imposed on Europe since 2008 – but this does not mean that neoliberalism 'belongs' exclusively to the West. From Augusto Pinochet to Narendra Modi, neoliberalism has taken on specific and powerful local variants. If we are to explain how and why we live in a neoliberal world, we must broaden our horizons.

This raises a subsidiary question: is it really possible to write the history of liberalism without also writing a history of anti-liberalism?³² The books and articles here overwhelmingly paint a picture of a liberalism thwarted by circumstance and undone by its lack of killer instinct, while liberals continuously appear to be apologising for themselves. Such a skewed view is not necessarily inaccurate. Sloman, in particular, makes an eloquent case for a British liberalism lost at sea in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Yet it is obvious that for liberalism to survive the better part of three centuries it has had to be more than simply an apologia for rational thinking and sensible government; it has also had to defend or impose itself on its enemies. The history of liberalism would look rather different if it included, say, Tocqueville's profound attachment to liberalism despite the increasingly illiberal politics of nineteenth-century France, Aron's determination to stand by his liberal beliefs in the face of overwhelming opposition from his intellectual peers or the brutal imposition of neoliberal economic policies on recalcitrant indigenous populations in Latin America and India. Seen this way, liberalism is – and always has been – a rather confident ideology. Its theoreticians have been (mostly) men of high intellect and wide learning. Its standard-bearers have been people who believe deeply in the value of progress, even when this has excluded 'lesser' or 'backward' peoples. And liberalism itself has largely remained a seductive combination of forward-looking rational utopianism and stodgy pragmatism.

School of History, Classics and Archaeology, William Robertson Wing, Teviot Place,
Edinburgh EH8 9AG; emile.chabal@ed.ac.uk

¹ On the umbilical relationship between financial capitalism and neoliberalism, see for instance Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

² On this, see for example Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (London: Princeton University Press, 2009).

³ This triumphalism is best exemplified by the now famous Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992).

⁴ France is a good example of this, as I will discuss later.

⁵ This is in sharp contrast to recent powerful indictments of liberalism such as Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2014).

⁶ Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015) is the most recent attempt to grapple with these definitional issues in a succinct way. In his words, liberalism is an ideology that is ‘a rallying cry for individuals desiring space to be free from unjustifiable limitations’, ‘a set of fundamental institutional arrangements meant to legitimate and civilize the practices of politics’ and ‘ideas and policies intended to reform, to emancipate, and to open up possibilities for individuals wishing to live their lives according to their own understandings’ (2).

⁷ He makes this argument in Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 160. There is now a vibrant discussion about the relationship between republicanism and liberalism in post-revolutionary French history. Varied approaches to this issue include Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (London: Cornell University Press, 2008) and Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 26.

⁹ Larry Siedentop, ‘Two liberal traditions’ and Lucien Jaume, ‘The unity, diversity and paradoxes of French liberalism’ in Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt (eds.), *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Siedentop's piece was originally published in Alan Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹¹ On the French liberal revival, see for example Mark Lilla (ed.), *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (London: Princeton University Press, 1994); Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, 'French Democracy Between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography' in *The Journal of Modern History*, 76 (2004), 107–154 and Chabal, *A Divided Republic*, especially chapters 6–7.

¹² Dieter Plehwe and Katja Walther, 'In the Shadows of Hayek and Friedman: Quantitative Analysis as an Exploratory Instrument in Socio-Historic Network Research', in Hagen Schulz-Forberg and Niklas Olsen (eds.), *Re-Inventing Western Civilisation: Transnational Reconstructions of Liberalism in Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

¹³ Ben Jackson, 'The Think-Tank Archipelago: Thatcherism and Neoliberalism' in Schulz-Forberg and Olsen, *Re-Inventing Western Civilisation*.

¹⁴ For an interesting perspective on power and its dissemination, see David Priestland, *Merchant, Soldier, Sage: A New History of Power* (London: Penguin, 2013).

¹⁵ Ideas of liberal moderation have been most thoroughly historicised in Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* (London: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Steven E. Aschheim, *At the Edges of Liberalism: Junctions of European, German and Jewish History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 23–4.

¹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Penguin, 2002), especially chapter 2.

¹⁸ This narrative of interwar political collapse and the failure of both liberalism and democracy is at the heart of Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1999).

¹⁹ Siedentop, 'Two Liberal Traditions' and Jean-Fabien Spitz, 'The "illiberalism" of French liberalism: the individual and the state in the thought of Blanc, Dupont White and Durkheim', in Geenens and Rosenblatt, *French Liberalism*.

²⁰ Aurelian Craiutu, 'Raymond Aron and the tradition of political moderation in France', in Geenens and Rosenblatt, *French Liberalism*.

²¹ On Furet (and Tocqueville's) use of the idea of political 'passion', see Christophe Prochasson, 'The Melancholy of Post-Communism: François Furet and the "Passions"', in

Emile Chabal (ed.), *France since the 1970s: History, Politics and Memory in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

²² Accounts of the rise of neoliberalism include Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²³ Some of the best close-grained, empirical work has been done by Serge Audier and Michael Behrent. See for instance Serge Audier, *Néolibéralismes: une archéologie intellectuelle* (Paris: Grasset, 2012); Serge Audier, *Penser le 'néolibéralisme'. Le moment néolibéral, Foucault et la crise du socialisme* (Paris: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2015); Michael C. Behrent, 'Liberalism without humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976–1979', in *Modern Intellectual History* 6, 3 (2009), 539–68; and Michael C. Behrent, 'Justifying Capitalism in an Age of Uncertainty: L'Association pour la Liberté Économique et le Progrès Social, 1969–1973', in Chabal, *France since the 1970s*.

²⁴ Niklas Olsen, 'A Second-Hand Dealer in Ideas: Christian Gandil and Scandinavian Configurations of European Neoliberalism, 1945–1970', in Schulz-Forberg and Olsen, *Re-inventing Western Civilisation*.

²⁵ This narrative is often heard amongst members of anti-globalisation and far-left movements. It can also be found in books such as Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2014). The expression 'new spirit of capitalism' is taken from Christian Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007), although Boltanski and Chiapello focus more on capitalism than neoliberalism in their study.

²⁶ One of the few historians to take these changes seriously is Daniel T. Rodgers, whose pioneering book offers an excellent template for how the intellectual history of the contemporary period can be written. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁷ Fawcett, *Liberalism*, 383.

²⁸ Samuel Moyn, 'The politics of individual rights: Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort', in Geenens and Rosenblatt, *French Liberalism*.

²⁹ Moyn himself has done this for 'human rights' in Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012). His argument is that the rise of 'human rights' is inextricably linked to the ideological transformations of the 1970s.

³⁰ This has been a common refrain in post-1968 French writing about the student protests of the late 1960s. Perhaps the most famous example of this narrative is Régis Debray, *Modeste*

contribution aux discours et cérémonies officielles du dixième anniversaire (Paris: Maspéro, 1978), but there are echoes of it in Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

³¹ European and North American historians still do not have a good grasp over the non-Western varieties of contemporary neoliberalism, but they have begun to investigate earlier forms of non-Western liberalism. See for example Christopher Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in an Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³² I develop this idea in Emile Chabal, 'Capitalism and its Critics: Antiliberalism in Contemporary French Politics' in Iain Stewart and Stephen Sawyer (eds.), *In Search of the Liberal Moment: Democracy, Anti-Totalitarianism, and Intellectual Politics in France since 1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).